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ABSTRACT

General comparisons are made between American and British reading instruction, and outstanding commonalities and differences between the two countries are emphasized. Both, for example, believe in the necessity for careful early instruction, and both believe in the importance of reading as a skill. Differences exist in attitudes toward learning to read. The author characterizes the Americans as being more curriculum-centered--concerned with what has to be done and with reading as an academic discipline. On the other hand, he characterizes the British as being more child-centered--concerned with instruction and with the development of reading as a learning tool. (MS)

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READING IN AMERICA AS COMPARED WITH GREAT BRITAIN

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I feel honoured by the U.K.R.A. Edinburgh Conference Committee's invitation to speak on this very interesting and important topic, but I approach it with trepidation. In a recent paper (Downing - 1968) I called for more scientific research in making comparisons between reading in different nations and different languages. But, today, I am conscious of the almost complete lack of scientific data on the subject of my address. However, I believe that one must always give the best possible answer to any question posed, and, therefore, I will try to draw as objectively as possible upon my experiences as a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley in the past academic year. I can claim at least to be using the anthropologists' method of participant observation. Better still, we may regard my statements as hypotheses which could be subjected to test in more scientific research if the funds were available for it.

Certain limitations on the validity of my comparisons must be stated at once. Firstly, I am being selective. Quite deliberately I am going to pick out what has struck me as being the one most significant and pervasive difference I have found between American and British reading. Secondly, I am going to generalize, although I recognize that there are many exceptions to this generalized picture. Thirdly, as I have pointed out in the introductory paragraph, this is not a report of the kind of scientific research we would all like to see on questions of comparative reading. Despite these limitations, I believe this comparison will be a worthwhile exercise. American and British reading teachers can learn tremendously by sharing each other's common problems and varied solutions.

I. WHAT WE HAVE IN COMMON

Educators in the United States and Great Britain have some important shared beliefs. Two ideas which are being emphasized more and more on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean are;

1. Primary education is truly of primary importance.
2. The teacher has the key role in improving standards of reading.

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America's "Head Start" programme and the British Plowden Committee's emphasis on the "priority areas" are outstanding examples of the great importance being placed in both our countries on the influence of early childhood experiences on later mental development. At this conference, from San Francisco Dr. Constance McCullough has urged us to reach the youngster as early as possible - "follow the ambulance!" she said. From London Dr. Kellmer Pringle also showed how tremendously significant are the early years in determining the kind of school life the child will be able to enjoy.

Furthermore, there is a growing realization that in primary education one special area of learning is of fundamental importance, and that is reading and related language skills. Probably this is more generally recognized in America than in Britain, but in both countries outstanding men of letters, psychologists, and educators have declared unreservedly that reading is the key to education and the civilised life. Here are just a few of the thoughtful declarations such people have made:

JOHN STEINBECK (1965): "Learning to read is probably the most difficult and revolutionary thing that happens to the human brain."

SIR CYRIL BURT (1962): "Reading is by far the most important subject that the young child learns at school. It is also the most difficult to teach."

FRANCIS KEPPEL (formerly United States Commissioner of Education in President John F. Kennedy's Administration):

"The better teaching of reading is the foundation of higher standards in our schools and colleges, and other efforts will fail unless this first step is taken."

At this fourth annual conference of the United Kingdom Reading Association in Edinburgh Dr. George Reith, the Director of this City's education system, told us in bidding us welcome that the U.K.R.A.'s aim is the "most important task in the whole field of education."

In both our countries such great men of foresight have tried to focus people's attention on the fact that such an everyday matter as reading cannot be taken for granted if we are going to make progress in education and civilisation. But, despite the support of these intellectual giants, we U.K.R.A. and I.R.A. members know what a great labour lies before us in gaining more general consciousness of the importance of the study of reading.

Similarly, the other current emphasis I mentioned as being shared by our two countries is also a reavowal of a basic principle - the importance of the teacher. The only general conclusion from the large scale United States Office of Education's First Grade Reading Study was that the teacher is the key to successful reading, far more important than any special method of teaching.

In Britain, too, there is a growing demand for recognition of the importance of the teacher in the improvement of reading standards. Recent scientific research has brought out this need very clearly.

Dr. Joyce Morris (1966) concludes on the basis of her research:

"The standards of seven-year olds were such that nearly half of them still needed the kind of teaching associated with the infant school at the time of transfer. From this it follows that the teachers responsible for their first-year junior classes should have been familiar with the infant school approach either by their college training or experience, and have known how to teach reading from the beginning. Investigation revealed, however, that approximately 75 per cent of their teachers had received no training in infant methods, 52 per cent had no experience in an infant school, and about 18 per cent were neither familiar with infant methods nor had any knowledge of how to teach beginning reading. It was also found that first-year junior teachers without infant training or experience were in charge of poor readers in half the sample schools. Moreover, in one in ten of the schools, those responsible for ensuring the progress of backward readers were not, in the opinion of their respective head-teachers, well-equipped for the task."

The horrifying neglect of the training of teachers of reading revealed by Joyce Morris' research has been confirmed by several other investigations.

Dr. Kellmer Pringle and her colleagues (1966) confirmed that the assumption that the learning of reading is complete by the end of the infant school course is not tenable.

In my own seven year research programme on i.t.a. and T.O. (Downing-1967) I concluded that the problem of slow-learners in i.t.a. who had not completed the i.t.a. course on transfer to the junior school is "only a special case of the more general one which is indicated by this research and the researches of others (notably Morris) referred to in earlier chapters. The common view that learning to read and write is a task to be confined to the first two or three years of school is erroneous and the main cause of poor standards of literacy. The learning of reading and writing skills should be viewed developmentally, and it should be recognized that improvement of reading skills is the responsibility of teachers at all levels of the education system from the infant school to the university."

American research revealed a similar problem. It included secondary teaching, too, and justified my inclusion of the so-called "higher" levels of education mentioned at the end of the preceding paragraph. The research of Dr. Mary Austin's et al (1961) on the training of teachers in America led her to conclude:

"Because the student entering secondary school from the elementary grades needs to expand his reading power in order to master the reading skills essential for success in the junior and senior high school, it seems unfortunate that few prospective secondary school teachers receive any instruction in the teaching of reading that will enable them to provide adequate guidance for their pupils."

But, relatively speaking, very much more is being done about reading in the training of teachers in American universities and colleges, as I will show in the second part of my address. What we have in common in American and British education to-day is a growing consciousness that, not only must we not take reading for granted as a mere mundane matter, but also we cannot neglect the training of teachers of reading if we want to make general educational advances. The teacher is the key. Therefore he or she must be given every possible opportunity to learn about the processes of reading and how they develop.

II. THE CHIEF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN READING

One important difference between American and British reading overshadows the many others which exist. American methods are more curriculum-centered. British methods are more child-centered. American teachers emphasize more what has to be learned. British teachers place more emphasis on understanding the psychology of the individual learner.

My own personal view, as one educational psychologist, is that what we really need is a balance between the two approaches. Both are equally important. Teachers cannot teach effectively what they do not understand themselves, but on the other hand, knowing one's subject cannot be fully effective if one does not take account of the pupil's psychological make-up.

1. THE BRITISH TEACHERS" ADVANTAGE

In Britain the state schools reflect a better understanding of the application of child psychology and the study of child development. The research and experimentation of people like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky appears to have been taken more seriously. Professor Jerome Bruner of Harvard University would find his theoretical approach more widely accepted in Britain than in his own country, I believe.

Jean Piaget's (1926) conclusive demonstration of the qualitative difference between the young child's logic and that of adults has made a real impression on British teachers. I have written about the implications of this and other research on children's thinking in more detail elsewhere (Downing - 1968). Now, time permits only that I remind you of the recognition in the teaching of young children in British schools, that to help young children learn effectively we avoid beginning with abstract concepts and make sure that we provide an environment full of concrete experiences needed for the development of generalizations. Also there is the important concern in British infant education that children must see the true purpose and personal relevance of such activities as reading and writing.

One of the most important pieces of reading research ever conducted was carried out in this city and was concerned with this very problem of 5 year old beginners' thinking about reading. Dr. Jessie Reid's (1966) work will give an American teacher a brilliant insight into this important aspect of British reading.

In the everyday classroom in Britain, in comparison with American schools, the following principles are much more frequently applied;

(i) Individualized teaching.

(ii) Orientation of the child to the true purpose of the written language.

(iii) Provision of concrete experiences and activities and a corresponding avoidance of adult abstractions.

(iv) Using writing as a means of creative self-expression in the early stages.

(v) A totally integrated curriculum.

(vi) Informal methods.

(vii) Responsibility for methods and materials given to the head-teacher and as far as possible to the class teacher.

Some Americans in the audience may be seething at any injustice to them, so let me reiterate my introductory point that these are generalizations. Yes - I can take you to a few schools near San Francisco where all these principles are regarded as important and applied just as well as in British Schools. But what I am saying is that this kind of approach is must less common in America than it is in Britain.

To show that I am not moved by national prejudice, let me quote from a respectable American Source. Dr. Dolores Durkin (1968) who clearly must be unhappy with the state of affairs she found, reports that her student teachers sent out to practice in local schools "with only one exception... found themselves in the classrooms in which the same basal reader was used with all of the children, regardless of their particular abilities and achievements. Actually, some schools were so tightly structured that teachers used only one basal reader series. In other schools there were choices from among several series, but the same curtailments existed: If a child sat in a 4th Grade classroom, for instance, he was NOT to read from a textbook above that level, even though his achievements obviously were above it."

It would be difficult to find this state of affiars in a British primary school to-day, yet Dolores Durkin sees this as "a basic problem in the teaching of reading" (in America) and calls it "the lack of match between instruction and children.

The outstanding and memorable case found in Dolores Durkin's research is that of a six-year old girl with a reading age of 10 who was in Grade One <u>in the sixth week of the reading readiness programme</u>! Again I would willingly bet that you cannot find a case like that in a modern British infants school.

The formal methods common in the large majority of American classes for young children were also noted by Dr. Durkin. On a visit to Kindergartens in her school practice area, she found in the first three classes a "very structured program in which the whole class was drilling on things like the identification of letters and sounds. This circumstance was especially surprising because all three of the schools were in low socio-economic communities suggesting that their kindergarten children probably needed many opportunities to extend speaking vocabularies, to express themselves freely, and so on. What I found-though, was this concentration on whole-class participation in rote learnings". Again, those of you who know the present-day British infants school will see the remarkable contrast.

In recent years unfortunately, this kind of approach has probably increased in American schools due to several circumstances. The amateurish ranting of demogagues demanding a return to the "good old days" of phonic readers with good moral tone have led to a parental witch hunt against professional educators trying to develop more modern methods based on the study of child development. "Permissive education" is a very dirty phase and "progressive education" is unspeakable for these agitators.

Recently there have been signs, however, of a revulsion against the "back-to-phonics-and-moral-tone" campaign which followed the launching of Sputnik. Ruth Strang's (1967) article "Is it debate or is it confusion" quite strongly criticizes the decoding emphasis in Jeanne Chall's (1967) recent book Learning to Read - The Great Debate. Joseph Featherstone's (1967) three articles in the New Republic bring out clearly the widening gap between the British infant schools with their child-centered approach and the much more rigid situation in American schools. for children of this age group. Hopefully these articles may indicate a move towards a more balanced and eclectic view of reading in America.

2. THE AMERICAN TEACHER"S ADVANTAGE

Now let us look at the other side of the coin and consider the very important lead which American teachers have over us in a highly significant aspect of reading! I believe that, although the British teacher is a long way ahead in his or her application of the psychology of young children, the American teacher is very far advanced in his or her technical knowledge and understanding of the processes of reading and how reading skill is developed.

Although many British primary school teachers are often consciously embarrassed by their lack of professional training in the teaching of the most important educational tool - reading, and any practical classroom teacher can see that one cannot teach something if one does not know what has to be taught, many Colleges of Education seem to make poor provisions for this subject. The resulting ignorance is the major cause of reading failure, and this failure along with the ignorance provides a fertile ground for dubious medico-neurological fads for curing backwardness in reading.

The Americans have got a long way ahead of us in solving this problem. They are quite clear about the need. Mary Austin (1967) states:

"Excellent teachers of reading are prerequisite to the improvement of reading instruction in every country throughout the world. How successful these teachers will be in their efforts depends in large measure upon the preparation they receive before entering the profession and the continuing guidance offered to them after they begin to teach."

Dolores Durkin puts it very simply:

"One cannot teach what one does not know."

But the realization of this massive defect in our British education system is being expressed more and more openly and forcibly. For example, earlier at this conference Dermot Abernathy showed that each teacher needs to analyze what a child has to do when he learns to read. Only then will the teacher be in a position to help, he declared.

Even some aspects of our special advantage in Britain are endangered by this failure to match knowledge of the child with knowledge of what has to be learned. For instance, the British teacher's traditional professional independence and freedom of choice of methods and materials is in large part mythical if the teacher is ignorant of the alternatives available. Again, Dolores Durkin, puts this point succinctly:

"Obviously if a classroom teacher is to make appropriate choices for the focus of her instruction, she must first know about the choices that are possible."

Furthermore, one popular view of child development in Britain has been shown by research to be quite erroneous. Our present school provisions are based on the false assumption that reading must be learned before the age of seven. After that, if the child has not learned to read, there must be something wrong with him. As the new president of U.K.R.A., Keith Gardner, has

shown in his research in Walsall schools, the effect of this erroneous view is that almost all children who fail to become independent readers by the end of the infant school are condemned to permanent backwardness unless expensive recovery measures are taken and even then an important proportion of cases do not respond to such special remedial treatment.

The truth that learning to read is a developmental process which continues through the primary, secondary and tertiary levels is recognized only by a comparatively small minority of British educators at present. One of these, William Latham (1968) who is himself a teacher trainer, makes this admission:

"I must answer the question, 'Are to-day's teachers adequately trained to teach reading?' by saying that they are not, for correct training procedures cannot arise from the false definition of reading which appears to guide our aims, actions and assessments at the present time."

Latham shows that it is the popular misconception of reading as merely "a decoding process" which leads in the training of teachers to "a tendency to restrict training.....to the teacher dealing with the beginner reader in the infant school." The same common erroneous view of reading results in "the teaching of higher-order skills, such as aid comprehension and inference, either to be assumed to be aspects of 'thinking' and thus everyone's, or possibly no one's, business, or dealt with piecemeal as part of method in subject areas. Thus, there will be, in general, a fragmentation of the related skills concerned with the printed or written word, and, certainly, it is unlikely that anyone will be produced who will be in a position to integrate the fragmented skills."

The vastly superior provisions for training teachers in reading which exist in American colleges and universities stems from this broader view of the nature of reading and learning to read. Typical is this statement quoted from the prospectus of the Reading Development Center of the University of Arizona:

> "Learning to read is a lifetime process. Therefore, courses in reading for teachers should include methods of teaching throughout the school and college years, not just in the lower elementary grades."

The contrast between this current American view of reading and the British one resulting in 75 per cent of first year junior class teachers having no training in appropriate methods to help their pupils' reading is remarkable.

My own experience in teaching masters degree students' courses in the psychology of reading, theories of reading, etc. at the University of California at Berkeley, can be matched in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States. Reading is a subject which enjoys high academic status and which is recognized in practice throughout the American education system as the vital key to all other studies.

This is demonstrated not only in the importance given to courses in reading at the university level, but also in many other ways. Many more provisions for in-service training are available, for instance. Most remarkable of all, in this respect are the N.D.E.A. summer reading institutes which teachers are paid to attend. Then there is the tremendous American investment in reading research. In college and adult reading alone Bliesmer (1967) reviewed 121 research reports published in a single year, and had to apologize for some studies being omitted! Also, in America, one finds a proliferation of professional organizations focussing on reading. Not only is there the International Reading Association, the parent body of our own United Kingdom Reading Association, but also the National Reading Conference, the National Council of Teachers of English, The College Reading Association, and others.

Professional publications on reading are many and rich in content, e.g. The Reading Teacher, Reading Research Quarterly, Elementary English, The Journal of Reading, The Journal of Reading Behavior, The Journal of the Reading Specialist, Academic Therapy Quarterly.

Reading conferences are frequent, and many volumes of yearbooks on reading result. The annual convention of International Reading Association now produces four volumes of papers.

In summary, reading in America has achieved high status as an academic discipline and as such is richly endowed with all manner of resources to make the American teacher of reading a well qualified expert in the development of this vital learning tool.

III. A PROPOSAL FOR MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT

How can we American and British reading teachers share our different advantages to the mutual benefit? I believe that giant strides foward can be made if two conditions are fulfilled:

1. On the one hand, American educators should study the British progress made in applying research and theory in child psychology and child development to early school learning. Alan Robinson's comment that teachers are going to have to learn to individualize instruction is a pointer in this direction.
2. On the other hand, British educators should take advantage of the American progress in understanding the processes of reading and the development of a total reading skill with all its varied sub-skills, and, also, their very considerable lead in communicating this essential information to teachers in pre-service and in-service training.

We, in Britain, certainly cannot affort to postpone establishing specialist provisions at the highest level for research and training in the field of reading and writing. It is no exaggeration to say that the future educational and economic progress of our country is bound to be severely limited through inadequate literacy unless high priority is accorded to the rapid establishment of such specialist institutions and services in reading.

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